DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 050 370 CG 006 370

AUTHOR	Metz, Marshall T.; Miller, Monroe J.
TITLE	What Type of Communication Increases Understanding Between Delinquents and Their Parents?
INSTITUTION	Colorado Univ., Boulder. Inst. of Behavioral Science.
PUB DATE	May 71
NOTE	8p.; Paper presented at the Rocky Mountain Psychological Association Convention in Denver, Colorado, May 12-15, 1971
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	*Communication Problems, Delinquency, *Delinquents, *Family (Sociological Unit), *Interpersonal Relationship, *Parent Child Relationship, Tape Recordings

ABSTRACT

This paper represents a preliminary attempt to evaluate the role of interpersonal understanding about connotative meanings in families with delinquent children. Specifically, it is concerned with determining: (1) whether there are differences between troubled and untroubled families in the level of understanding of connotative meanings; and (2) whether the establishment of communication through tape recorded messages leads to an increase in understanding of connotative meanings. The results of this investigation suggest: (1) there is greater understanding of connotative meanings in "normal" families than in families with delinquent children; (2) the misunderstanding in troubled families is primarily a function of parental misunderstanding of sons; and (3) the use of taped communication results in increased accuracy for such families. The finding that "delinquent" parents are less accurate than their sons supports the view that communication in such families tends to be unidirectional. The parents do not listen to nor learn about the feelings and concerns of their sons. It is obvious that improvement of the total family situation requires two-way communication. (Author/TA)

ED050370

WHAT TYPE OF COMMUNICATION INCREASES UNDERSTANDING BETWEEN DELINQUENTS AND THEIR PARENTS?[1]

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION
THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

Marshall T. Metz and Monroe J. Miller
Institute of Behavioral Science
University of Colorado

This investigation was concerned with increasing understanding among members of families in which an adolescent had been judged delinquent and placed in a correctional institution. Although it is generally agreed that the absence of understanding between parents and adolescents is a key problem, there have been few systematic attempts to utilize techniques specifically designed to increase understanding. Different forms of family therapy are frequently used with delinquent families, but the physical separation of parents and child creates practical difficulties for treatment. Further, the utility of these approaches with respect to increasing understanding is not entirely clear. This paper reports a preliminary attempt to increase understanding through the establishment of communication by the exchange of tape recorded messages.

Hammond, Wilkins, and Todd (1966) have defined interpersonal learning as the process whereby one person learns to predict the responses of another to a variety of situations. In applying this approach, Miller (1970; 1971) has used the term interpersonal understanding to refer to those situations in which the participants have a history of experience with one another. In one investigation, Miller (1970) showed that "delinquent families" had less understanding of one another than a control group of untroubled families. Further, the use of taped communication was effective in increasing the under-

[1]Paper presented at Rocky Mountain Psychological Association Meetings, Denver, Colorado, May, 1971.

CG 006 370

standing of one another between parents and adolescents, that is, the ability to predict the denotative meanings of key family terms was substantially increased. The study suggests that the lack of understanding contributes to the difficulties that these families have in coping with many of the situational problems they face.

The above investigation, however, dealt with the problem of understanding only in the sense of the "denotative" meanings attached to key family terms. There has been no investigation of the ability of people in such families to understand the "connotative," or affective-subjective meanings of terms used by other family members. Consider the following example:

> Youth - "I'm quitting school."
> Father - "The hell you are! You're finishing school! An education's important and you just want to be a bum."
> Youth - "I'm not a bum! I'm quitting school and you can't stop me!"

In the situation characterized by the above quotations, it seems clear that both the father and the youth understand what the terms <u>school</u> and <u>education</u> mean. Further, the youth is generally aware of the importance and desirability of education, but for many reasons, often unrelated to education per se, he feels that the school situation is untenable for him. Thus, while they may understand what these terms <u>denote</u> to one another, the youth's feelings about "education" and "school" may not be communicated to his father. That is, there is no interpersonal understanding concerning the subjective-affective meanings of these terms. The absence of interpersonal understanding with respect to connotative meanings may deter the father and son from constructively dealing with the problem of the youth dropping out of school.

In a broad sense, interpersonal understanding requires that one person understand both the denotative and connotative meanings of terms for another person. In other words, one must be able to predict both the objective and

subjective associations a concept has for another person. Kuhlman, Miller, and Gungor (1970) have investigated the combined effects of differences in connotative and denotative meanings upon interpersonal conflict and shown that when disagreement exists as to both connotations and denotations, conflict reduction is quite difficult. Further, while persons can learn about the denotative meanings others attach to terms, the problem of learning about connotative meanings has not been investigated. The present study is a preliminary attempt to evaluate the role of interpersonal understanding about connotative meanings in families with delinquent children. Specifically, we are concerned with determining 1) whether there are differences between troubled and untroubled families in the level of understanding of connotative meanings, and 2) whether the establishment of communication through tape recorded messages leads to an increase in understanding of connotative meanings.

METHOD

Six families, each containing an adolescent boy, participated in this investigation on a voluntary basis. In three families (experimental), the boy had been judged delinquent and placed in a correctional institution. In the other three families (control), the boy had no record of legal difficulties.

The semantic differential technique (Osgood, Suci, and Tannenbaum, 1957; Snider and Osgood, 1968) was used to evaluate the connotative meanings of a series of family related concepts for each subject. In addition, the same technique was used to evaluate each participant's understanding of the connotative meanings of these concepts for the other family members. The concepts used in the investigation were: 1) friends; 2) appearance;

3) freedom; 4) obedience; 5) school; and 6) family. Each subject was asked to rate these concepts on a series of 7-point semantic differential scales representing three dimensions. In this investigation, only the evaluative dimension was examined. The scales contained in this dimension were: 1) good-bad; 2) nice-awful; and 3) sweet-sour. After rating each concept, each youth was asked to predict how he thought each of his parents would rate the concepts, and each parent was asked to predict the scales of his or her son. The accuracy with which members of these families could predict one another was measured by the mean of the absolute difference (across the three evaluative scales) between the predictions of one person and actual ratings of another.

Tape exchange procedure. After the initial evaluation, the three experimental families participated in a tape exchange program lasting for several weeks. In each case, the youth constructed a tape-recorded message directed at his parents. The parents listened to this tape, then taped a reply. The procedure continued until the boy and his parents had each constructed and listened to three tapes. Each tape lasted approximately 30 to 40 minutes with the experimenter asking questions of the participants concerning the issues included on the semantic differential task. The experimenter, however, did not act as a directive interviewer so that the content of the tape recordings was determined primarily by the participants. (See Miller, 1970 and Miller and Davies, 1971, for further discussion of the tape exchange procedure.)

Upon completion of the exchange of the tape recordings, the level of understanding of connotative meanings was re-evaluated by use of an alternate form of the semantic differential which controlled for set and memory effects. Control families did not exchange tape recordings, but received pre- and

post-tests over the same time interval as the experimental families.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the mean predictive accuracy scores for the experimental and control families before and after the exchange of tape recordings. This indicates that on both pre and post-tests the members of the experimental families were less accurate in their predictions about one another than were the members of the control families. Table 1 also shows that both experimental and control families tended to increase their accuracy from pre- to post-test although the amount of increase is greater for the experimental families. (It should be noted that the increase in accuracy for the control families is largely accounted for by changes in one concept, school.) During the post-test, the experimental families were closer in accuracy to the control families than during the pre-test.

- -

Insert Table 1 about here.

- -

Table 1 also indicates that for the experimental families, parents were less accurate than their sons whereas there was no difference between parents and sons for the control families. Although the experimental parents increased their accuracy from pre- to post-test, they remained less accurate than any other group. It should be noted that the accuracy shown by the sons in the experimental families was virtually the same as that shown by sons in the control families. The primary misunderstanding in the experimental families, therefore, rests in the parents predictions of their sons.

The findings of this investigation are further illustrated by the levels of accuracy shown for the concept "obedience". This concept is important because of the crucial role that issues surrounding obedience play

in troubled families. Table 2 shows the levels of predictive accuracy for this concept before and after the exchange of tape recordings for the experimental and control families. This indicates that for the experimental families, parents are strikingly inaccurate during the pre-test and although increasing their accuracy, do not approach the level of accuracy shown by all other participants. It is the inaccuracy of the parents which accounts for the differences between experimental and control families for this concept. The level of accuracy shown by experimental parents during pre-test is virtually that which would be achieved by random predictions. The control families show no reliable increase in accuracy for this concept.

- -

Insert Table 2 about here.

- -

DISCUSSION

The results of this investigation suggest: 1) there is greater understanding of connotative meanings in "normal" families than in families containing delinquent children; 2) the misunderstanding in troubled families is primarily a function of parental misunderstanding of sons; and 3) the use of taped communication results in increased accuracy for such families.

The finding that there is less accuracy in experimental families lends support to the view that not only must understanding be achieved with respect to the denotative meanings used in discussion, but that the members of these families must also learn about what various terms connote to each other for full understanding to be achieved. While it is true that the procedures in this investigation tap only a limited portion of the domain of meaning, the results nevertheless emphasize the potential importance of misunderstanding what others' mean.

The finding that experimental parents are less accurate than their sons supports the view that communication in such families tends to be unidirectional. The parents do not listen to nor learn about the feelings and concerns of their sons. It is obvious that improvement of the total family situation requires two-way communication.

It should be noted that this investigation was intended as a first step in evaluating the role of connotative meanings in the case of families with delinquent children. It should also be noted that the exchange of taped communications in this study, while focusing on discussion of the concepts evaluated, did not, in all likelihood, go far enough in providing the participants with the information they required. Specifically, it would be important to determine whether the provision of direct information about the meanings of these terms for the participants would serve to increase accuracy even more. At a minimum, more directed discussion of these issues as part of the communication which occurs should be implemented. In a recent investigation, Miller (1971) has shown that differences in connotative meanings make it difficult for persons to learn about one another's denotative meanings for the same concepts. In the case of troubled families, the engagement of difficulties in understanding of meanings is an essential requirement for betterment of relations and more effective family functioning.

Table 1

		PRE	POST
Cont.	Parents	1.3	1.0
	Sons	1.3	1.0
Exp.	Parents	1.9	1.0
	Sons	1.4	1.1

Mean accuracy of predictions for all concepts.

Table 2

		PRE	POST
Cont.	Parents	1.3	1.1
	Sons	1.0	1.1
Exp.	Parents	2.4	1.6
	Sons	1.2	1.1

Mean accuracy of predictions for the concept of "obedience".